DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 366 527 SO 023 653

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TITLE Womanism and Me: I Know That I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.
PUB DATE [93]
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Studies; *Feminism; Higher Education; *Lesbianism; *Social Bias; Social Science Research; *Womens Studies
IDENTIFIERS *Black Womens Studies

ABSTRACT

This paper begins with a college teacher's account of certain "re-memories" of what it was like to grow up black and female in the American South--an account that leads into a recital of all the things she did not know then but knows now. For example, she did not know that speaking and knowing are revolutionary acts that project the silenced, silent object into a ranting and raving, dangerous "I." Nor did she know that power and regimes of truth circulate through educational apparatuses; that language can be used in opposition to racist and patriarchal hegemony, and that individuals, including black women, can use their power to move from silence to speech. She goes on to say that black women have struggled to use their power through speech to define and redefine for themselves who they are. Such women can be called "womanist," Alice Walker's term for black feminist. The term suggests outrageous, audacious, willful, serious behavior. Such terms as "domineering" or "hard to get along with" have been used as stoppers to silence the womanist's voice and her critique of oppressive situations to shame the womanist into submissiveness. The womanist contributes to the world of academia through the development of a theoretical perspective which moves away from a structuralist approach that seeks to snuff out her existence and intellect. She knows there is a world which is not yet, and that this world exists within her and "the not yet but that which can be." (Contains 20 references.) (SG)

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"Womanism and Me: I Know that I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings"

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Since Lynda Stone invited me to join this group of gender/feminisms researchers, I have struggled with the development of this particular piece; and I have pondered over my desire for choosing such a sexy topic. Where did the yearning to speak to womanism and me originate? I finally concluded that "rememories"[1] of my childhood have consumed me lately. Rememories of my mother laboring to create comfortable space for her husband, my father, and her children; rememories of my father resisting Jim Crow; rememories of being a four-year-old first grader who asked too many questions; and rememories of being sexually molested by my paternal grandmother's employer. And I rememory feeling like a caged bird trying to sing my songs of opposition and freedom. But one rememory that continues to touch my spirit and heart is:

> One warm South Carolina day my mother, Elizabeth, and my paternal aunt, Miss were on the back porch engaged in woman talk, as my mother loaded the ringer-washing machine. I listened to their conversation, as I usually did because I wanted to know that of which grown women speak. These two women were discussing the pregnancy of a community woman. Elizabeth said that the woman was "big." To this Miss responded, "Big! When she go'n quit havin' babies?" I asked Miss, "Miss, what is 'big?'" Miss said to me, "Girl, she go'n have a baby." I asked, "Miss, how she get 'big?'" And my mother immediately scolded

[1] I borrowed this term from Toni Morrison's Beloved (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1987).

> me for interferring in grown folk talk. Elizabeth said to me, "You always asking things you ain't got no business. You so womlish. Go play!"

During my childhood, womlishness/womanish was not considered to be empowering; rather, the girl was viewed as fast, hot and heading for trouble (usually that meant getting "big" while engaged in a sinful act). I did not know that when one dares to speak there appears to be deliberate transgression or that speaking upsets established laws.[2] I did not know that speaking and knowing are revolutionary acts that project the silenced/silent object into a ranting and raving dangerous "I." I did not know that power and regimes of truth circulate through educational apparatuses such as schooling, curricula, textbooks, masternarratives, media, and technology.[3]

I did not know that language could be used in opposition to racist and patriarchal hegemony. For example, Billie Holliday writes about her great-grandmother and herself:

> My great-grandmother was a white man's mistress, doxy, common-law wife. Whatever you want to call it. She was also just a slave on his plantation. . .
>
> They [the white male club owner] told Basie I was too yellow to sing with all the black men in his band. So I had to be darkened down so the show could go on. . . . It's

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[2]Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: Volume I, R. Hurley , Trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 6.

[3]Michel Foucault, Power and Knowledge, edited by Colin Gordon and translated by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham and Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977); and Dianne Smith, "'Why Do We Have to Read about Girls Living in London and Australia?': Reflections from a Womanist Theorist on Critical Education," in Lynda Stone (ed.), The Education Feminism Reader (New York: Routledge, in print 1993).

like they say, there's no business like show business. You had to smile to keep from throwing up.[4]

I did not know that through voice, she is relating her life as a singer in the 1930s through the 1950s, exploited by the white male owners of the music industry, to that of her great-grandmother's life--sexually and economically exploited by the white male slave owner. In essence, I did not know that Billie Holliday's document positions her lived experiences in an historical context which creates unities, series and relations. That is to say that "The document is no longer for history an inert material through which it tries to reconstitute what *people* have done or said, the events of which only the trace remains."[5]

I did not know that naming "The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance"[6] is an act of defiance and dangerous.

I did not know that Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God raises questions about the values of security, respectability and culture in marriage and lifestyle for black women. For the protagonist, Janie Crawford, marries three times to question love and responsibility; and after her second marriage, she realizes

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[4]Billie Holliday with William Duffy, Lady Sings the Blues (England: Penguin Books Limited, 1956), 4 and 61.

[5]Michel Foucault, The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 7. In the original quote Foucault uses the word "men" where I have chosen to use the word "people.

[6]Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (New York: Random House, 1969), 231.

the inequality, silence, submissiveness, and the use of her self as a sex object. "The deterioration of the marriage is signalled by the end of sexual relations and by Janie Crawford's decision to withhold her real thoughts from this false idol, made to fit her dreams."[7]

Janie Crawford says, to her reader, one day while working in the store,

> The town had a basketful of feelings good and bad about Joe's positions and possessions, but none had the temerity to challenge him. They bowed down to him rather, because he was all of these things, and then again he was all of these things because the town bowed down.[8]

This is one moment when Janie Crawford knows that to be a possession is to be dreamless; therefore, she symbolically buries Joe but continues to dream.

In addition, Their Eyes not only raises the issues of silencing, submissiveness, and sexual expectations of black women, by black men; the text shows how a woman can, at the stage of middle age, fall in love and begin to play again, as well as love again, unconditionally. Janie Crawford and Tea Cake marry and share their partnership in labor, friends, fun, and sex. Zora Neale Hurston projects Janie Crawford's passion, jealousy, sexuality, desires, and possessiveness. These are feelings and desires that are reserved for men, only.

However, I now know that I know how power works and that I can use my power to move from silence to speech, as bell hooks

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[7]Sister Mary Ellen Doyle, "The Heroines of Black Novels," in Willa Johnson and Thomas Green (eds.), Perspectives on Afro-American Women (Washington: ECCA Publications, Inc., 1975), 117.

[8]Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1937, reprinted in 1965),

notes. I now know that black women have struggled to use their power through speech to define and redefine, for ourselves, who we are. For example, I know what Maya Angelou means when she writes, "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat."[9] I know what that razor feels like as its cold, steel interrupts the life of the cinnamon, blackberry, walnut, almond, ivory girl/woman.

I now know what Maya Angelou means when she writes, "Without willing it, I had gone from being ignorant of being ignorant to being aware of being aware."[10] I now know that I had gone from being ignorant of being ignorant to being aware of being aware. And Alice Walker's In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens pushed me to willfully and knowingly claim my womlishness/womanish. She defines a womanist (or womlish as my childhood experience indicates) as

> A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black fold expression of mothers to female children, 'You acting wominsh,' i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one. Responsible. In charge. Serious. Also, a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes love individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves

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[9]Ibid, 3.
[10]Ibid, 230.

> the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.[11]

I am a womanist! I am a womanist! I know that I know why Richard Wright described Zora Neale Hurston's characters as "minstrels, to make white folks laugh."[12] She chose to pursue the theme on the celebration of life; and she chose to create complex, complete black female characters who questioned their relationships with black men and the community. That is, as Vivian Gordon suggests: black women must contribute to the development of theoretical perspectives which allow for a movement away from locked-in application of models and paradigms developed for eurocentirc society to afrocentric beliefs and lifestyles.[13]

As a black female anthropologist, folklorist, and writer during the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston mirrored Vivian Gordon's conjecture in that she is

> One of the first writers to use folk images and speech as well as the insular folk culture, Hurston anticipated future black women writers who would attempt to define themselves as persons within a specific culture rather than primarily through thier relationships with whites. . . . Their Eyes invokes not one class but the total community--its language, images, mores, and prejudices--as its context. In so doing it articulates the Afro-American experience not only as a condition but as a culture.[14]

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[11]Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi-xii.

[12]Richard Wright, "Between Laughter and Tears," a review of Their Eyes Were Watching God, in New Masses (1937), 23.

[13]Vivian Gordon, Black Women, Feminism and Black Liberation: Which Way? (Chicago: Third World Press, 1985), xii.

[14]Barbara Christian, Black Women Novelists (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980), 46.

Subsequently, I know that Zora Neale Hurston's work as a writer who anticipated future black women writers and one who had achieved a consciousness of a distinct black culture and inspired the literary works of black women writers of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. For her "discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and *her* discontinuity with *herself* may be determined."[15]

I am a womanist! I am a womanist! I know that I know what Abbey Lincoln means as she takes her reader to another dimension; she "names" in her discourse the sexist oppression that black women confront daily in our homes and community by our black men. She writes these thoughts:

> But strange as it is, I've heard it echoed by too many Black full-grown males that Black womanhood is the downfall of the Black man in that she is "evil," "hard to get along with," "domineering," "suspicious," and "narrow-minded." In short, a black, ugly, evil you-know-what.[16]

I have been labeled "hard to get along with," "domineering," a "cock blocker," "dyke," and "cold." I now know that these are stoppers to silence my voice and my critique of oppressive situations. These are stoppers to shame me into submissiveness, subordination, compliance and passivity. But I am a womanist and I will not yield.

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[15]Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, 55. I changed the masculine pronouns to the feminine, in italics.

[16]Abbey Lincoln, "Who Will Revere the Black Woman?", in Toni Cade (ed.), The Black Woman: An Anthology, 82. See also Michelle Fine (ed.), Disruptive Voices: The Possibilities of Feminist Research (Ann Arbor, Mi.: The University of Michigan, 1992) for a discussion on naming and the demystification of the culture of silence.

I am a womanist! I am a womanist! I know that I know why Alice Walker's Color Purple is outrageous. It is because she creates a womanist novel that weaves a group of female protagonists who approach the theme of black female oppression, e.g., incest, sexual exploitation, black lesbianism and violence, with fiery energy. Not only does Alice Walker break the forbidden rule of naming rape in the black family by the black man, but she broaches the mistreatment of us by our men through Celie Johnson and her relationship with Mister, her husband: "Mr. come git me to take care his rotten children. He never ast me nothing bout myself. He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bandaged. Nobody ever love me."[17]

Additionally, in Color Purple Alice Walker audaciously breaks black silences about heterosexism and homophobia as she announces the love that black women are afraid to explore and share with one another. Celie Johnson and Shug Avery are womanists in that they care for each other in a sexual as well as nonsexual manner. In a letter to God, Celie Johnson talks about her first sexual encounter with Shug Avery:

> Oh, Miss Celie, she say. And put her arms round me. They black and smooth and kind of glowy from the lamplight. I start to cry too. I cry and cry and cry. Don't cry, Celie, Shug say. Don't cry. She start kissing the water as it come down side my face. . . Nobody ever love me, I say. She say, I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth. Um, she say, like she surprise. I kiss her back, say, um, too. Us kiss and kiss till us can't hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other. I don't know

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[17]Alice Walker, The Color Purple (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), 109.

> nothing bout it, I say to Shug. I don't know much, she say. Then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth. Way after while, I act like a little lost baby too.[18]

I now know why Alice Walker insists that the black woman's responsibility is to herself and to others. That is, such counter-hegemonic discourse is subversive and articulates resistance and opposition to domination. In so doing, the black woman demystifies the social construction of the defined self and reframes or re-defines for herself who she is and/or chooses to be.

I am a womanist! I am a womanist! And I know that I know why SDiane Bogus, a black lesbian, celebrates her existence in this universe. In Dyke Hands & Sutras Erotic & Lyric, she writes that

> Because dyke hands are the sexual organs of lesbian love, they can be as shocking to view as the penis through an open fly, or as bold (delicious) to behold as the breast of a woman suddenly uncovered. And because of this, dyke hands ought be given the covered respect they deserve.
>
> The hands that stroke my hair, caress my flesh, that grip my thighs, press my love button, that slide between the satin readiness of my labia, ought not be seen by the daily populace. They belong in gloves, or mittens, and perhaps as a nation of womyn identified lesbians, white, black, or brown leather gloves can be made the symbol of our private sexuality, and between us at least the idea that we are lovers of womyn can be acknowledged by us all. . . . I wish for the lesbian nation a consciousness of our sexuality for our strength lies in it.[19]

I am a womanist! I am a womanist! I am one of Maya Angelou's "strong black birds of promise who defy the odds and gods and sing their songs." Contrary to regulations, I sing because I am happy and

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[18]Ibid, 109.

[19]SDiane Bogus, Dyke Hands & Sutras Erotic & Lyric: Poem & Essays (San Fransico: WIM Publications, 1988), 64-65.

I sing because I am free. I sing because of Elizabeth Jeffries Smith, my mother. I sing because of my sisters and my nieces. I sing because of Angela Davis; I sing because of Maggie Finefrock; I sing because of Maxine Greene; I sing because of Tenar Tate and Essie Smith. I sing because I reject the suppression and falsification of the black female experience. I sing because the stories by black women, as my good friend Maxine Greene notes, "shed many kinds of light on the meanings of freedom and the search for freedom . . . in such writings we find a dialectical relation to what surrounds us, a conscious pursuit of freedom as an existential project, a central life task."[20]

I know that I know that I, too, am contributing to the world of academia the development of a theoretical perspective which moves away from a structuralist approach that seeks to snuff out my existence and my intellect. And I sing because I know that there is a world which is not yet for I have dreamed of it; I have seen and felt it . . . this world exists in me and the not yet but that which can be.

"'The moving finger writes and having writ, moves on. . .' and my soul would escape gracefully."[21]

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[20]Maxine Greene, The Dialectic of Freedom (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988), 66-67.
[21]Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, 211.

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